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## Cheri Register

**Packinghouse Daughter**  
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### Q & A with Cheri Register: The Rise and Fall of Solidarity

Cheri Register holds a Ph.D., but to her that scholarly designation stands for "packinghouse daughter." Register grew up in a working-class family in Albert Lea, MN. When she was 14, a strike at the local Wilson & Co. meatpacking plant, where her father worked as a millwright, divided her community and put her family's security in jeopardy. The United Packinghouse Workers of America went on strike against Wilson's in November 1959 after workers were locked out of the plant in a dispute over mandatory overtime requirements and many other issues. The company continued to operate the plant with non-union workers whom it hired as "permanent replacements" for the strikers, leading to violence in Albert Lea: Minnesota's governor called out the National Guard and imposed martial law to keep peace in the town. He also closed the packinghouse, which drew national attention to Albert Lea: The strike ended in February 1960 after both sides agreed to arbitration, but many workers, including Register's father, were not called back to work for months. The strike became a major coming-of-age experience for Register and left her with lasting loyalties to those who labor, even as she has moved into the middle-class professions of writing and teaching. In her memoir, *Packinghouse Daughter*, Register combines interviews and historical research with her own memories of the strike and its impact on her hometown. First published in hardcover by the Minnesota Historical Society Press in 2000, *Packinghouse Daughter* has won an American Book Award, as well as a Minnesota Book Award for autobiography and memoir. A Perennial paperback edition was released by HarperCollins on Labor Day 2001. Register recently spoke about how and why she came to write this book.

**Q: Why did you decide to write the story of the Albert Lea strike?**

**A:** I had to write this book. I couldn't leave it alone. Originally, I intended to write about the 1960s, looking at the myth of the 60s as a time when suburban kids went off to college, discovered injustice and became social activists. I was curious about how working-class kids experienced the 60's. My plan was to interview my high school classmates, many of whom didn't go to college or, if they did, they worked their way through and didn't have time for other activity. Also, we already knew about injustice — at least economic disparities. I started the interviews, and it didn't take me long to realize nobody really wanted to talk about the 60s. They were more interested in what it had meant to grow up the way they did and how their relationships with their parents had changed. Occasionally, the subject of the strike would come up.

**Q: Did you remember the strike?**

**A:** Oh yes. It was a huge moment in my life. I had even tried to write about it as fiction, but I wasn't satisfied with that. I realized I'd rather write from life than make it up. I wanted to examine the role the strike had played in my life and how much it had determined my outlook on life. But while the strike is the central event of the book, it's not completely what the book is about.

**Q: What is the book about?**

**A:** Working-class life—but not as it's usually portrayed, as an urban, ethnic experience. Not much has been written about small Midwestern industrial towns. I also didn't want to show just the militancy of the strike, as labor history often does, but how packinghouse work and the union shaped our daily existence. It's also about the lasting hold that a working-class childhood has on you, even if you're upwardly mobile.

**Q: How important was the union to your family?**

**A:** The union and the DFL (Democratic-Farmer-Labor) Party were very tightly linked in my experience. Sometimes I couldn't tell which was which because much of the DFL activity was based at the union center. So those two organizations were major forces in my life. Now that I've looked back from adulthood, I can see how important the union was to its members, not just in negotiating contracts, but in teaching them about civic responsibility and leadership. It was a very grass roots union, and the local officers got to be very politically astute, even though they may never have finished high school. After my dad retired, he had a second career as a city councilman and county commissioner. He'd learned the skills for that as a rank-and-file union member and a DFL campaign worker.

**Q: There is a wonderful section of the book in which you describe your sixth grade class touring the Wilson's meatpacking plant where your father worked. As the students get closer to the kill floor, there is a sense that you and your classmates found this experience exciting but frightening as well.**

**A:** Oh yes, there were definitely mixed emotions. Talking about that experience was one of the clues that I had to write about my dad's work. I had a conversation with one of my classmates, who now has his own engineering firm, and he said that field trip was the day he decided to go to college. He couldn't get over seeing his dad trimming fat off beef carcasses in a room as cold as a refrigerator. I think only one or two of the kids in my sixth grade class ever did work at the plant.

**Q: Is the book nostalgia?**

**A:** Well, it's hard to be nostalgic about cold, bloody work. I did worry about sounding nostalgic. I wanted to show what our life was like, without romanticizing or making it look like the golden age of labor. But yet it was a better time for labor than it is now. With the movement of factories abroad and other changes, we've lost the stable blue-collar communities where families like mine could own a house and a car and be good citizens and aspire to something better for their kids. We never lived in poverty, though we were pretty frugal and my parents were very self-sufficient. They did their own plumbing, their own electrical repairs, my dad built two houses in his spare time, and my mother could sew anything. They had a proficiency for living that I — and most people of my generation — do not have and that I miss. Also, our outlook was not so materialistic. We were consumers, of course, but that was not the end-all of life. Relationships, especially extended family relationships, mattered more, and work mattered — working hard, doing a good job.

**Q: The 1959 strike at Wilson's plant in Albert Lea centered on issues of job security. Did your family fear that your father's job would be gone any minute?**

**A:** There was always a threat hanging over Albert Lea that if we got out of hand somehow, if the union demanded too much, Wilson's would pull out and move down south where there were no unions. Munsingwear, where my mom worked for a while, had already done that. So, the threat was real, but the fear grew beyond its proportions. The Albert Lea plant was one of Wilson's most profitable plants. It shipped all over the country and even provided meat to the most expensive restaurants in New York City. It was not likely that Wilson's would close the place down. They knew they had a good thing going, with a highly trained and very settled workforce.

**Q: While the book is your personal story, you interviewed some of the participants in the strike. How many people did you talk with and how did you decide whom to include?**

**A:** It was not all that systematic. Many significant people have died. Some did not want to be interviewed because the memories were too painful. I did interview both labor and management people, but I didn't pretend to be looking for balance. I ended up with about 20 interviews, which was enough to fill out the story. I could have gone on and on, because I love listening to people talk about their lives, but then the book would never have been finished.

**Q: Who was Hazel Gudvangen and what was her role in the book?**

**A:** Hazel worked on the bacon and sausage lines at Wilson's for decades. She was a single mother for several years, and a very active union member — one of the first women to have a leadership role in the local union, as a steward. During the strike, she kept a scrapbook with all of the daily newspaper clippings about the strike, plus lots of other memorabilia, like her picket-duty card and letters from the company and lists of scabs working at the plant. I call her my silent collaborator — she died many years ago — because that scrapbook was such a help in getting a feel for what happened, day by day. I would go down to Albert Lea to the Union Center and sit by myself in a conference room paging through the scrapbook, and it was as exciting as reading some ancient document. This history mattered enough to Hazel that she kept this careful record.

**Q: Was there anything you discovered in doing research that surprised you?**

**A:** Three things. First, I learned that the early sit-downs that led up to the strike were not spontaneous. They were planned. As a teenager I had seen them as a spontaneous uprising, but that wasn't the case. And now I admire the union for having a strategy to press the issues. Second, I was surprised at how much of the strike hinged on one personality, James Cooney, the president of Wilson & Co. He'd had a long career already as a union-busting lawyer, and Wilson's was always the last holdout, of all the major packers, in contract negotiations. The strike ended only when the union found a way to offer Judge Cooney a chance to save face on the key job-security issues. He agreed privately to submit the question of who was entitled to jobs — the strikers or the "permanent replacements" — to arbitration. It was unsettling to see that so many people's livelihoods could be hanging in the balance because of one man's quirks. Finally, I was surprised at how much support there was behind the scenes for the striking workers in Albert Lea: A lot of merchants, for example, recognized that the Wilson workers, with their union wages, were a steady source of business and that losing them could destroy the town. Even the local judge who had to rule on cases of strike violence wrote a letter to the arbitration board urging that the strikers be hired back. I wish I had known about that support at the time. I really did feel beleaguered and that people were looking askance at us.

**Q: Did that feeling of isolation affect you?**

**A:** Yes, it did. I felt I had to stick up for my family and the people like us. I got pretty outspoken and rebellious after the strike. I was ready to take on the world. When I left Albert Lea after graduation, I was bitter about the town. I'm not sure how much of this was just teenage rebellion and how much had to do with the civil rights movement, which was happening at the same time. But the strike woke me up to the world and to a strong sense of justice.

**Q: How do you think a strike of this type would play out today? Could it happen again?**

**A:** I don't think a strike quite like this one would happen. The meatpacking industry has changed so drastically. It's more automated, there's less skilled work, and wages are way down, even when you adjust for inflation. In order for collective bargaining to work, you need a strong sense of solidarity. That's hard to achieve with a transient workforce, which is what you get when wages are low. Many of the workers are immigrants, some refugees, and it's hard to organize people with no common language. The idea that management and labor both have a responsibility to the local community is hard to get across. People are more likely to give up and move on. The companies, too, close plants and move on.

**Q: Do these economic changes concern you?**

**A:** Yes. A decently-paid working class provides stability in any community. Look at Chicago. It was union jobs in the meatpacking industry that created vital African-American neighborhoods where people owned houses and businesses and established community institutions. When those jobs go, the community evaporates. We'll end up with an upper class of professionals and an under-class doing low-paid service work. How do you support a family on \$7.00 an hour? To have a balanced society, we need manufacturing jobs that require skills or offer training and that give people pride in their work.

**Q: Is the Wilson packinghouse in Albert Lea still operating?**

**A:** That's a sad story. Wilson's went bankrupt in 1983, and the plant has been closed and reopened and changed hands several times since then. The workforce dropped to about a tenth of what it had been in its heyday, and the kills were shut down. Finally, in the mid-1990's, Farmland Foods, a large farmer-owned cooperative, took it over. That was the best the town could hope for. This summer, they had almost 600 people working there, and were planning to add 250 jobs within a year. Then, on July 8, a fire broke out and destroyed much of the plant. It's still uncertain whether it will ever reopen. It's hard on the whole town to lose that income.

**Q: What's next for you?**

**A:** I've barely started on another book. In some ways it may be a continuation of this one, with memoir and history, Albert Lea and social class. The question that interests me is how you find the authority to be a writer or an artist of any type when you grow up in an environment where nothing like that is expected of anybody.

**Q: You mentioned in Packinghouse Daughter that people in Albert Lea might not welcome a book about the strike. What has been the public response?**

**A:** I'm amazed at how positive it's been. I did a reading in Albert Lea shortly after it came out, and there was a standing-room only crowd. Everybody was so encouraging, and they even seemed pleased to get to read about something familiar. In the question period, they were eager to talk about their own memories, no matter how they were involved.

**Q: How about elsewhere? Is it selling outside Minnesota?**

**A:** I'm amazed at the response it's gotten. I really had few expectations for this book. It was one that I needed to write, for my own purposes, and I knew it would have some limited regional interest. Well, even before it was officially released, a woman who teaches English composition at a public university in Pennsylvania ordered copies for her freshman class. They are mostly first generation college students from an industrial area that's declining, and she wanted them to write their own stories in response to mine. Then Publisher's

Weekly did a feature on it, as a "sleeper" that was selling by word of mouth. That's how Harper Collins heard about it. I get letters and e-mail and phone calls from people who tell me they laughed and cried all through the book, because they've never been able to explain to their adult friends, or even their own kids, what it means to grow up in a working-class family. I didn't know, either, that other people felt this way, so I love hearing their stories.

**Q: Much of the book is, of course, about your father. Is he still living?**

**A:** Yes, he's almost 90, and still going pretty strong. He has bad knees and macular degeneration, but his mind is still sharp. It always was. He's the reader I worried about most, because in a way I was appropriating his life and telling his secrets. He'd keep asking me, "How is that book coming?" but I never showed him any of it until it was published, and then I gave him the first copy. He'd call me every day to tell me what page he was on, and I'd look it up and think, oh no, here it comes. But he hasn't objected to any of it, and he brags about it to everybody. He's sure it's going to sell about a million copies — and it would have to, to pay me a decent hourly wage. He's gone with me to some readings, and while people are lining up to have books signed, he has his own line, waiting to talk to him. I'm so glad I went ahead and did this.